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THIS earliest of modern Bards, who composed his excellent, though singular poem about the year 1300*, in describing the Elysium, prepared for the reception of those Pagan worthies whose

Read April 9th, 1796.

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merits

* Dante was born, according to Boccaccio, in the year 1265, and probably wrote his *Comedia* at about the age of thirty-five years, a period of his life which many reasons concur to make us suppose was honoured by this wonderful composition, and which well accords with what he himself says in the first line of his poem.

Nel mezzo del Cammin di nostra Vita.

I have styled Dante the earliest of modern Bards, and so he undoubtedly was of such as have merited that illustrious appellation, though the *Poesia Provenzale* began to be cultivated so early as in the year 1100, and though Italian poetry may be traced back to the year 1184—about sixty years however it continued in its infant state, and was first brought to a degree of maturity by Fra. Guittone D'Arezzo, who flourished about the year 1250.

merits might have justly entitled them to a seat in Paradise, if they had partaken of the baptismal rite, mentions Aristotle as holding the first and principal place among the ancient philosophers.

Poiche'nnalfai un poco piu la ciglia
 Vidi 'l Maestro di *color che fanno*
 Seder tra Filosofica Famiglia.
 Tutti l'amiran, tutti onor gli fanno.
 Quivi vid' io e Socrate, e Platone
 Che 'nnansi agli altri pui presso gli stanno.

My eyes a little raising, I descried
 The sov'reign master of all *those who know*,
 Sitting among the philosophic race,
 Admir'd by all, by all rever'd and honour'd :
 There I beheld both Socrates and Plato,
 Who prior to the rest stand close beside him.

THE character of Aristotle, which will bear the test of the most enlightened times, was peculiarly revered in the darker ages at the first Revival of Letters, and the praises lavished on this philosopher approach almost to idolatry. His great Commentator, the Arabian Averroes, says of him that before Aristotle was born nature was yet incomplete, and that she received from him the perfection of her being. The Theologians of Cologne held, that Aristotle was the precursor of the Messiah in the mysteries of nature, as John the Baptist was in those of Grace. Dante assigns him, in the passage here cited, the first place among Philosophers, and cannot better shew his predilection than by preferring him to Socrates, and even to his master Plato, who are honoured by being placed next to him. Yet he does not venture so far as
 Sepulveda,

Sepulveda, a learned Spaniard of the sixteenth century, who, though an excellent, and, in all other points, an orthodox Catholic, publicly sustained, and printed his opinion, that the soul of Aristotle was beatified in heaven.

We shall not be surpris'd at the prevalence of the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies in the more western regions at the first dawn of literature, when we consider that these were the fashionable sciences among the modern Greeks, who had refined upon their refinements, and rendered their obscurity still less intelligible, and that Constantinople was, in effect, the source from which learning flowed into Italy, the great reservoir of knowledge, where it would naturally retain its original form and qualities; and this cause will appear still more probable when we reflect that, though originally derived from the Greeks, it was brought into the western parts of the world by the Arabians, who, in their conquest of the Asiatic provinces had made themselves acquainted with all the learning of Greece, and whose speculative, subtle, and romantic genius, perfectly adapted to metaphysical disquisition and to artificial dialectic, had eagerly seized, and adopted with a preference those sciences to which it was best suited. This species of erudition which they had found prevalent among the conquered Greeks, by their frequent incursions into the western regions, and principally by their settlements in Spain and Africa, they had diffused and established among the unlettered inhabitants. Manuscripts of all kinds they had in their victorious progress collected, and translated with avidity; and that Aristotle in particular was, and long continued, their favourite author,

may

may be concluded from the *Gran Comento*, as Dante styles it, written on his works by the Arabian Averroes * about half a century previous to the time of the poet.

THE perpetual, violent, and trifling controversies also, which long disgraced the Christian church, had introduced an ardent passion for dispute, and a spirit of nice argumentation, and had prepared the minds of men to adopt and to admire the subtle and unintelligible jargon of the schools. Eager for victory in this war of words, Aristotle's logic was greedily studied as an armour of defence, and a means of successful controversy; and the same spirit of nice discrimination exciting in the mind a love for what was difficult to be understood, and an ambition to be thought to comprehend what was scarcely intelligible, his philosophy was revered in proportion to its obscurity, and has consequently obtained such a sanction and bigotted preference, that it still remains, as it were by prescription, the exclusive doctrine of almost all European seminaries †.

BUT,

* Averroes, or Averroys, died in the year 1206. I have styled him *an Arabian*, and such indeed he was by descent, though born at Cordova in Spain; from whence he migrated into the dominions of the king of Morocco, by whom he was invited to settle in his country, and was raised to offices of the highest dignity and importance.

† This was undoubtedly the fact not long since, and still, I believe, continues to be true, particularly in Italy.

We are told by Voltaire, *Essai sur les Mœurs*, &c. Tom. x. p. 222. 4th Edition: that so late as in the reign of Louis XIII. in or about the year 1624, the Parliament of Paris prohibited under pain of death the teaching any thing contrary to the doctrine of Aristotle, and that a person of the name *De Clave*, together with his associates,

was

[illegible][illegible]

BUT, besides these accidental causes, we may perhaps find a reason for the preference given to this species of science at the early approach of light, in the nature of the human mind, which, when emerging out of ignorance, is apt, at its first expansion, to seize with avidity the more abstruse and refined parts of knowledge. Metaphysical researches, and every species of nice, subtle, and

was banished from Paris for having sustained certain positions contrary to the principles of this favourite philosopher on the number of the elements, and on matter and form. The same author, however, in a note on the third canto of his *Pucelle*, limits the penalty to that of the Gallies, which seems the more probable from the punishment of *De Clave*, who would scarcely have received so slight a sentence as that of *banishment from Paris*, for a crime which the law had made liable to death.

For this marked preference given to the Aristotelian doctrine in all *Catholic* seminaries Bayle slyly assigns the following reason: ‘ *Après tout, il ne faut pas étonner que le Peripatétisme, tel qu’on l’enseigne depuis plusieurs siècles, trouve tant de Protecteurs, et qu’on en croit les Interêts inséparables de ceux de la Théologie; car il accoutume l’Esprit à acquiescer sans évidence. Cette Reunion d’interêts doit être aux Peripatéticiens une gage de l’Immortalité de leur secte, et aux nouveaux Philosophes un sujet de diminuer leurs Espérances.*’

The glory of Aristotle suffered a short eclipse at the very beginning of the thirteenth century, when his metaphysics and physics were prohibited from being read as favouring the errors of heresy, but, having been commented upon, under the protection, as is supposed, of the Pope, by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, it again shone forth with redoubled splendour.

To evince the esteem in which this great philosopher was held in the more enlightened times I shall here cite the weighty authorities of Grotius and of Erasmus. The former in the Preface to his Book, *De Jure Belli et Pacis*, has these words, ‘ *Philosophos meritò principem obtinet locum Aristoteles, sive tractandi ordinem, sive distinguendi acumen, sive Rationum pondera consideres.*’ And Erasmus, *Epist. Lib. xxviii. Ep. 13.* thus speaks of him, ‘ *Aristoteles Philosophorum, ne Platone quidem juxta M. Tullium excepto, citra controversiam, omnium doctissimus—Unus hic Philosophiam, a diversis per Fragmenta sparsim mutilatimque traditam, in ordinem redegit, ac veluti in Corpus compegit.*’

and ufelefs difquifition, feem to be preferred in the infancy of letters to the more folid and profitable fcience, as the attention of children is captivated and fixed rather by fupernatural and romantic tales than by fober and ufeul hiftory ; and the fubtleties of metaphyficks will prevail among the half-enlightened in the fame manner, and for the fame reafons, as the abftrufe follies of magic and of aftrology. When the mind firft feels its powers, and finds itfelf affifted and borne up by the wings of literature, it feems to think that it never can foar too high. Exulting in its newly difcovered energy, it fondly fupposes that nothing can arreft its progrefs, ignorant as yet of thofe impaffable bounds which nature has fet to its flight. The blind man, fuddenly reftored to fight, would naturally firft fix his eyes on the fun as the moft glorious object of contemplation, till experience fhall have taught him that he is dazzled by its beams !

BUT if, in the infant dawn of learning, the mind is apt to baffle and lofe itfelf in thefe ufelefs and preternatural excurfions, fo do we alfo find it in the decline and decrepitude of letters. The ftate of infancy and that of dotage are equally imbecile, and produce nearly the fame effects.

ANOTHER caufe of the early preference given to metaphyfical enquiry may perhaps concur with thofe already mentioned. As the Being of a God is believed and acknowledged even by the moft unlettered favages, it is no wonder that the nature of that Being, with whom all hopes and fears are intimately connected, should

should be the first object of interest to the expanding soul ; and its own nature will certainly be the next object of its eager researches. —When we have once learned to think, it is most natural that we should wish to know how and why we think. To satisfy its curiosity will be the first amusement of the infant mind ; and Science will therefore take place of Taste, which, as it is only to be acquired by a nice and critical investigation of beauties and of defects, must naturally await the slow progress of Study.

SUCH were most probably some, at least, of the causes which, during the course of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, plunged and absorbed the learned of Italy, the great teachers of the West, in the unfathomable depths of scholastic speculation and metaphysical refinement, and, by prompting the mind to attempt the solution of invincible difficulty, baffled the efforts of the most penetrating genius, and checked the progress of useful knowledge. Hence proceeded that rage for abstruse disquisition, which, not content with rendering Prose unintelligible, infected and obscured even the pleasant Region of Poetry, so as that scarce a Love-sonnet could be given to the world unattended by the long, laborious, and perplexing comments of fashionable Philosophers—Hence was the stream of knowledge so far perverted and choaked in its course as to threaten with inundation those fields it was meant to fertilize—Hence the dark allegories and mystic theology of the learnedly-poetical Dante, and his best of imitators, Frezzi*—

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Hence

* *Monignor Frezzi Vescovo de Foligno* composed, between the years 1380 and 1400, the *Quadriregio*, an excellent Poem written in successful imitation of Dante.—The merit of this very ancient and singular composition would entitle it to be better known by foreigners.

Hence were the early and preternatural abilities of Pico della Mirandola lost to the benefit of mankind; and hence was Petrarch, the man of all others best adapted to the propagation of true Science, and who, even thus led astray, powerfully contributed to its advancement, bewildered in the flowery, but pathless, mazes of metaphysical or platonic Love—yet all was perhaps for the best; and the mind, by exercising its powers in the investigation, and eager pursuit of impossibilities, may probably have encreased its natural vigour, and have thus become more fit for beneficial enquiry; as the body, by having been early inured to exert its strength in unprofitable efforts, is rendered more able for the real emolument of useful labour.

I HAVE said, in the former part of this Essay, that *Constantinople was the source from which Learning flowed into Italy*; an assertion, which, though made in conformity with the opinion generally received, will require some explanation, as it is hazarded in apparent contradiction to the respectable authority of Voltaire, who, in his *Essai sur les Mœurs*, Tom. ix. of his works, page 164. 4to edition, has these words, ‘ On fut redevable de toutes ces belles Nouveautés
 ‘ aux Toscans—Ils firent tout renaitre *par leur seul Genie*, avant
 ‘ que le peu de science qui etait resté a Constantinople refluat en
 ‘ Italie avec la Langue Grecque par les Conquetes des Ottomans—
 ‘ Florence etait alors une nouvelle Athenes, et parmi les Orateurs qui
 ‘ vinrent de la part des Villes d’Italie haranguer Boniface viii. sur son
 ‘ Exaltation, on compta dix huit Florentins—On voit par la que
 ‘ ce n’est point aux Fugitifs de Constantinople qu’on a dû la Re-
 ‘ naissance

‘ naiffance des Arts—Ces Grecs ne purent enseigner aux Italiens
 ‘ que le Grec.’

THE ingenious author is certainly well founded in his assertion that Science and the Arts flourished in Italy long before the loss of their Imperial City had forced the Greeks to seek in the more Western Countries an Asylum, which their talents amply repaid to their generous Protectors ; yet still my position may be true, since the channel, through which I have supposed the Greek Learning to be conveyed, is totally different from that mentioned by Voltaire, and the time of such influx greatly antecedent. Long before the taking of Constantinople had compelled these Sons of Science to seek elsewhere a refuge for that studious and contemplative ease to which they were wholly addicted, their learning had, according to my idea, been propagated in Italy by means of the *Arabians*, whose conquests, and not those of the *Turks*, were in reality the original source of Italian Literature, and Florence had already become *une nouvelle Athenes*, not merely *par le seul Genie des Florentins*, however brilliant that genius most certainly was, and how greatly soever it contributed to their literary acquirements, but from the fortunate importation of scientific materials, which brought it into action, and upon which it was enabled to operate. It must also be allowed that, whatever decay Science had experienced in its favourite clime, the general fund of Learning was in some degree increased by the accession it received from the fugitive Greeks, and though the Greek Language was undoubtedly known and studied in Italy long before it was taught there *par ces Fugitifs*, we may naturally suppose that, after their arrival, it was more

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generally

generally diffused, more methodically taught, and its utility augmented by a considerable addition to those manuscript treasures of which Italy was already possessed. Neither is the advantage to be derived from a thorough knowledge of the Greek to be considered merely as the accession of a new Language, but as the opening of a fresh and copious source of Science and of Taste.— Indeed the language of the Greeks, and the importation of their books, may be considered as an advantage far greater than any which could result from the introduction of their best Teachers, since, however the latter might have degenerated, the former still have remained, and ever will remain, the true standard of Elegance.